

3rd Sunday of Lent “An Encounter with a Scriptural Jesus”
Fr. Frank Schuster

The readings this Sunday remind me of Friedrich Schleiermacher for some reason. Do you remember him? Just kidding! He was a Lutheran theologian living about two hundred years ago in Germany, who argued that religion is less about what you think and more about what you feel. He was reacting partly to the Catholic Church and our love for objective doctrine. However, I think he was mostly reacting to another Lutheran, Immanuel Kant, and his popular book, “Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone”. Schleiermacher argued very persuasively his position that religion is first and foremost not about “reason” but about “God consciousness”, a sense and taste for the infinite. For example, in our circle of friends, there are some people who have a greater ear for music than others and some have a greater taste to distinguish the subtleties of fine wine better than others, and there are also those of us who have a greater God consciousness than others. This could explain why some people are instinctually more religious than others. In this way evangelization for Schleiermacher consisted of encouraging the growth of God consciousness in others, enhancing a sense and taste for the infinite. Schleiermacher’s system was very well thought out and included an elaborate description of what the consciousness of the holy looked like and what the consciousness of sin looked like.

Looking back, I think it was rather prophetic that the Church condemned his theological approach, and for good reasons. From the Church’s perspective, although we receive spiritual consolations and a spiritual consciousness of what is holy and evil, and yes there is a sense and taste for God up to a point, there is nevertheless objective truth, things that are simply right or wrong whether we are conscious of them or not. Sin has a way of distorting our consciousness. Sin has a way of over time distorting a religious community’s or even a country’s consciousness of right and wrong. As close as the disciples were to Jesus, their God consciousness was ironically off most of the time. After Jesus was arrested, the disciples fled in every direction. One wonders, how are we any different?

For example, it seems like for the God consciousness of a republican, Jesus is a conveniently a fellow republican and for the God consciousness of a democrat Jesus is conveniently a fellow democrat. Without doctrine, without objective truth, our so-called God consciousness can reduce our idea of Jesus to a mere projection of our egos, another good definition for an idol. In my thinking, it was only when the risen Jesus breathed on the Apostles that they finally got it. It was only then that they were truly commissioned, one could say ordained, for the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and handing on the deposit of faith to their successors. The essential doctrines of our faith are unchanging, they do not bend to culture.

And so, Schleiermacher has been on my mind lately. You see, it seems to me, the idea of religion as a mere feeling, has taken hold just about every place in our day and age. The religiosity of many has moved away from what scripture and tradition has to say about Jesus to what my sense and taste has to say about Jesus. In the process, the Jesus of Sacred Scripture gets replaced with a watered-down idea of Jesus, a cuddly Jesus, a teddy bear Jesus, a Jesus that is OK with whatever awful thing we think, say, or do. And then, Gospel readings like the one we have today come along of Jesus cursing a fig tree, and it is very good medicine.

My friends, it is very healthy to have a personal relationship with Jesus who we know in our heart loves us. He does. I want that relationship for everybody. However, we should watch out that our personal relationship with Jesus doesn't devolve into "Jesus is OK with the fact that I never pray" Or, "illegal drug use won't imperil my soul, God is OK with whatever I do to my body". Or "it is OK to cheat on my spouse, God understands." Or "I know there are people who are impoverished in our world and community, but God is OK with me not helping or caring". Or, perhaps the most dangerous of all, "Everyone is going to heaven. No one really goes to hell". I believe these attitudes are very dangerous for our souls. Attitudes like, "I will pick and choose the scriptures I like about Jesus and disregard the uncomfortable passages about Jesus because religion is not about what the Church teaches, or the bible for that matter. Religion is about my God consciousness and my sense and taste of the infinite."

My friends, all three readings this weekend give us a different appreciation of God...a strong God, a tough love God. ...And so, Moses was tending a flock when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire flaming out of a bush. When Moses answers God's invitation to come closer, God soon says, "stop, come no nearer". "Remove the sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground." Take a second and consider what this means. Take a second and consider the reverence God demands of Moses. It says Moses hid his face because he was afraid, and rightly so. We can ask ourselves, what would this mean for us today? What does that metaphor mean to take off our shoes when we are in God's presence? I think it speaks to the value of reverence.

Moses asks for God's name. God's response is "I am who I am". Which is the same to say, I am your God you are my creation. For every little bit of knowledge you can absorb, I am infinitely more. I will not give you a name because I refuse to be turned into an idol, like the false gods my chosen people turn to at times. And so, the only name God offered to Moses is "I AM". It is a name that, in Hebrew, is considered so holy by the Jews that it is blasphemy to utter it. For us today, the second commandment comes to mind and why it is irreverent to take the Lord's name in vain.

Along those lines, we turn to our second reading, St. Paul reflects on the Exodus and writes "our ancestors ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, yet God was not pleased with most of them, so they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us so that we might not desire evil things, as they did." What are we to make of that? What this means is, there are sometimes consequences for our sins that God allows so that greater good can come from it.

Now enter in our Gospel today, "Jesus said to them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.'" Jesus continues with passing judgement on the fig tree that doesn't bear any fruit. If the fig tree doesn't bear fruit soon, "cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?" Boom! Where is my teddy bear Jesus now? Where is the Jesus that tells me I am OK no matter what evil I cling to?

Christians, the Church this Sunday is challenging us with a scriptural Jesus. Is Jesus a healer? Yes. Is Jesus our redeemer? Yes. "Does Jesus love me?" Yes! There is the proof. There is the proof. His love for us flows from the cross there to our altar here where he truly offers us his body and blood as sacred nourishment for the soul. That is how much he loves us! We should take care however to not take his love for granted. Does Jesus love us? Yes! Does he redeem us? Yes! Does he demand our love and our obedience in return? Yes! This means we must remember that Jesus Christ is Lord, not one day a week but every hour of every day. Every hour that we live on earth is a gift. God does not owe us anything. We owe God everything.

The good news is, whether we have a sense, taste or feeling of the infinite or not, Jesus offers his friendship to all of us, whether we feel like it or not. From those preaching at the pulpits to those sitting in the pews, the quality of our friendship with the Lord will ultimately be defined by our response, in how we live our discipleship, in how we truly love God and neighbor as members of the Body of Christ, the spouse of Jesus, the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church.